

The Inglenook

The Candlewood Potato Circle.

BY FREDERICK E. BURNHAM.

The sewing circle of the Candlewood mission church had assembled in the vestry to consider a proposition made by Squire Carter with reference to the raising of the church debt.

The church treasurer, Miss Sophia Kinsman, after all other resources had been exhausted, and it seemed that for the want of five hundred dollars the mortgage would be foreclosed, had applied to the more or less skeptical Squire Carter for assistance in behalf of the church, and he, stroking his long beard, had, much to the treasurer's surprise, declared that he would seriously consider the case, and reply one way or the other on the following morning.

It was his letter of reply which the sewing circle listened to, and which raised such a whirlwind of indignation that had the Squire, soldier that he was, been there, he would certainly have had serious thoughts of retreating.

CANDLEWOOD, April 2, 1897.

Treasurer of Mission Church:

I would state that in reply to your application for financial assistance in behalf of the church, that I have, after due reflection, decided to assist you.

Provided that the young ladies of your sewing circle will plant, cultivate, harvest, and market a crop of potatoes, I will prepare, free of expense, two acres of my land, and furnish the seed.

Yours sincerely,

John S. Carter.

"The wretch!" exclaimed Deacon Adams' daughter, wrathfully, scarcely able to restrain her tears. "A potato circle!" shrieked the president.

All had some word of indignation to utter. And if any conclusion was to be drawn from her remarks, it certainly was that the Squire was the king of churls. However, the wrathful utterances presently subsided, only a lone muttering now and then, like the belated popping of fire-crackers after the lunch has gone off, sounding here and there.

"Let's turn the sewing circle into a potato circle just for fun, and for the sake of the money," said the treasurer at length. "We will show Squire Carter that he made a big mistake when he proposed this, thinking that we hadn't the pluck to take it up!"

Never was there a motion more quickly carried than the one just proposed. There was a way to get even with the Squire, and the girls saw it.

To say that the Squire was surprised when Miss Sophia Kinsman called the next morning and informed him that the sewing circle had accepted his offer, but faintly expresses his state of mind. He was astounded, and admitted to himself that he had made a mistake when he had called the society a troop of beggars who would beg but not work. His opinion of the girls was summed up in his one declaration, that "they hadn't grit enough for a sand-bank."

At first the Squire had thought to give the two-acre lot of old pasture land in the rear of his stable, but when he looked down into those two honest blue eyes he suddenly changed his mind. Much to his chagrin he found that there was a very suspicious mist gathering before his eyes and before he realized what he had done he had promised that they should have the south slope, the best two acres on his entire farm.

The farm hands wondered why the Squire was so particular that the dressing should be extra heavy this year on that land and that the plowing should be as light as possible. Then, too, he always sent the head man for whatever seeds were required on the farm, but this year he made a special trip of

some twenty miles and bought twenty-five bushels of an extra fine variety of seed potatoes.

It was a mystery until Monday morning came, when, to the utter bewilderment of the help, a score or more of young women put in an appearance.

The Squire pretended not to notice their peculiarly sensible costumes, but he did nevertheless, and he said to himself that the girls were fully as sensible as many outside the church.

He ordered the men to carry the cut potatoes to the field and show the girls how to plant and cover, but as soon as they had done a dozen hills to return at once. It was a bit of thoughtfulness on the part of the Squire, and the girls appreciated it, for what novice likes to work under the eyes of an expert?

When the Squire rode by the field on the way to the village he was watching a young horse of his in a pretty sharp manner, but he took in the whole scene on the south slope, and to tell the truth he felt a bit ashamed that he had not put his hand in his pocket and helped the church out, for he could have done it ten times over and not felt it in the least; but that was not his way, and he comforted himself with the thought that the girls were better off out of doors than they would be in the house.

At the end of the week the field was planted and the girls did not have to work all the time either. But nevertheless, they heaved a sigh of relief when the last hill was planted. The Squire came out and viewed the field and declared that the work was well done. As for the hired men, they asked each other in the same breath what the world was coming to.

It was a fortnight before the potatoes were well up and three weeks before it was necessary to scratch the field over with a hoe, but at the end of the third week Miss Kinsman received a note from the Squire stating that an enemy was in the land; that all the troops should be pushed to the front—in other words, that the potatoes needed to be hoed and the weeds cut off. "Weeds are like bad habits," said the Squire, with mock seriousness when the girls arrived: "once allow them to get a firm hold and they are terrible things to root out."

Interminable seemed the rows which the girls now began to weed and hill up, but patient industry, day after day, for a week, accomplished the task. Their backs ached and their hands were blistered, but they were country girls and the work in the end did not do them a particle of harm.

The girls had scarcely finished the hoeing, however, when a second summons came from the Squire, stating that another enemy had arrived on the field of battle.

It was true. The potato-bugs had descended upon the potatoes by the tens of thousands. Paris green would soon have vanquished the enemy, but, much to the chagrin of the girls, the Squire declared, with his mocking smile, that it was wicked to put even an insect to death with a slow poison. "Pick them off and bring them to me," he said, "and I will chloroform them or put them out of the way in some humane manner."

So pick them off one by one the girls did, though it seemed as though their backs would break before they had finished.

Meanwhile the weeds were obtaining a fresh hold. In a word, it was one continual round of weeding one week and picking off bugs the next until the middle of September.

It was hard work but the girls had the satisfaction of knowing that they were keeping their enemies at bay and as a result there was not a potato-patch in the

whole town that began to come up to it in thrifty appearance.

At length the tops began to turn yellow, and finally died altogether, and it was then that they began to dig the crop.

For the first day or two it was real fun to dig the great, smooth beauties, and, as one girl remarked, it was like hunting hen's eggs. But the two weeks of digging which followed took all the poetry out of the work, and it was with decidedly thankful hearts that they uncovered the last hill.

The Squire said the market was good, and that they ought to get a good price for the crop, if sent at once, inasmuch as being on the south slope they were a full week ahead of most of the neighbors.

There they stood in the field. Seven hundred and twenty bushels of them, and three-quarters of them true number ones. The girls were proud of them and well they might be. "Come in the morning," said the Squire, "and we will talk over the best way to get them to the market. And in the meantime you might as well choose about half a dozen who are willing to assist in the disposing of them."

That was to be the hardest thing of all: none of them relished the idea of driving the great loads to the market, but they finally drew lots, and the six who were chosen made up their minds to face the inevitable, and help dispose of the crop.

Meanwhile the Squire had been a busy man. As soon as the girls had gone home he had harnessed his horse and driven to the adjoining town and closed a bargain with a large dealer in produce whereby he disposed of the entire seven hundred and twenty bushels at eighty cents a bushel. It was a part of the contract that the entire lot should be off the field before sunrise the next morning.

The Squire was just finishing his breakfast when the six representatives of the potato circle put in an appearance. He told them to drive to the field, and that he would join them in a few minutes. With all the eagerness of a child the Squire sat down at his window and watched over the brow of the hill for the reappearance of the girls. Sure enough. Down the hill they came, the horse galloping, and the girls jolting about like corn in a popper.

"The potatoes are gone! gone! gone!" wailed the girls in chorus, amid a shower of tears, when they had arrived.

For once in his life the Squire was truly sorry that he had indulged his passion for practical joking. The utter discouragement of the girls was too real to afford him a bit of amusement.

"Why! Why, girls!" he exclaimed.

"They're gone!" reiterated the girls together.

"Well, let us talk the matter over calmly," said the Squire, leading the way into his study. "Let me see," he continued, "seven hundred and twenty bushels, say at eighty cents a bushel would amount to—why, bless my soul, girls, if the thief hasn't been in here and left a check for the whole lot!"

Then that rogue of a Squire pretended to look in astonishment on a check from the Derby market for five hundred and sixty dollars, the buyer paying nothing for the twenty odd bushels, to offset the poorer ones which would sell for "number two's."

The two hired men were next dispatched in all haste to hunt up the remainder of the potato circle and at noon they drove into the yard with two team-loads of the happiest young women imaginable, for of course the girls had pumped the men until they told the whole truth as to the disposal of the crop.

Behind the two teams came the best caterer in the town with a load of everything that heart could desire in the way of eatables. There was nothing too good for the Squire to purchase that day in order to make the afternoon and evening a success.

The check which the Squire handed the treasurer paid the church debt in full, and when the potato circle resumed its duties as a sewing circle there was a snug sum to its credit.

As for the Squire, he said there was no use in dodging the point: there was at least one lot of church workers who were not afraid to soil their hands.—Christain Observer.